

Strategic Significance of Soviet
Power Projection Activities

1. Throughout the last decade the Soviets have pursued a policy of expanding and strengthening their global reach and influence, including greater use of support facilities overseas, more frequent naval and air presence at longer ranges, and the pursuit of increased operational experience in distant areas.* This expansion has been complemented by Soviet surrogate force deployments and military aid to client states and to revolutionary movements in politically unstable areas. While the principal theaters of Soviet focus appear to be in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, Soviet reach extends westward via Cuba, where they maintain a permanent brigade base, to the Central American mainland. It also stretches southward along both the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean coasts of Africa. Facilities on the Arabian Peninsula and islands of the Indian Ocean provide sustenance on an aperiodic basis to Soviet naval and air units.

2. In the Near East and South Asia, the Soviets currently can politically rely on use of facilities in Afghanistan, Syria,

*The word "facilities" is used in this paper instead of "bases" to denote the tenuous nature of most Soviet overseas staging points. With the exception of Soviet Army barracks in Cuba, and possibly in Syria, Soviet facilities overseas are not comparable with the well-developed network of bases used by US forces.

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the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), and Ethiopia. There is a possibility that they may also gain access to air and maritime facilities in Libya. In the case of Syria they have direct control of air defense systems, including SA-5 surface-to-air missiles, which provide them a capability against hostile aircraft over Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, part of Turkey, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Strategically, this situation means the Soviets can control the southern entrance to the Red Sea from the PDRY and Ethiopia, and at least contest US air and naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean from facilities in that area. They are not currently in a position to completely control the Straits of Hormuz, but they could launch strikes in the area using long range aircraft from the Soviet Union.

3. In the Pacific, where the Soviets maintain their largest fleet, their interest in overseas support development centers on Vietnam, particularly the facilities at Cam Rahn and the airfield at Da Nang. Soviet sponsorship of the Hanoi regime affords at once a modicum of encirclement of China and a vantage point from which operations could be undertaken along the vital international sea lanes stretching across the Indian Ocean, northward via the South China Sea to Japan.

4. The leverage which the Soviets realize from these as yet modest deployments is highly significant. From a military point of view they have acquired a number of actual and potential staging points from which intelligence and logistical missions

can be regularly mounted, and they have laid the foundations upon which, with additional investment, regional offensive strike capabilities could be built. Soviet long-range aircraft often reconnoiter Atlantic waters from the Barents Sea to the Caribbean and southward to Luanda, Angola. East of Africa, Soviet transport flights stretching southward across the Arabian Sea to the Seychelles and Mozambique are possible precursors of new military operational routes.

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8. In sum, while their efforts are by no means comparable to US forward basing patterns, the Soviets do appear to be steadily increasing their ability to delay US reinforcement of critical theaters around the Eurasian landmass in time of crisis. In addition, they have developed a network of widespread outposts and areas which support their avowed goal of world revolution. While some of the posts are of greater importance and utility than others, in their entirety they constitute a major challenge to planners charged with ensuring Western security.

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